

In Art, Nobody Knows What They're Doing

Or, Art Advice is Not Universal

By Ava Jarvis <me@avajarvis.com>

Document History

Original URL: <https://www.pillowfort.io/posts/173028>

2018-11: First version

2018-12-06: Archive.org upload

Text

So I was doing my 15-minute browse of a few Twitter feeds (I try to restrict Twitter a lot these days, it's just not healthy) and found an excellent thread by Chuck Wendig about a rather... obtuse writing advice article.

Here's the roll-up of his thread on ThreadReaderApp: [clicky](#)

I have my own perspective on this as well from a visual art point of view. Which is that all those rules your elders tell you are important to make your art look great?

None of those rules are universal. No path any artist takes will ever be the same as yours. No other artist knows the inside of your head or the map of your heart better than you. Any artist who claims they know you better than yourself is, at some level, a fraud.

Some artists, especially those who command much praise and possibly money, will try to sell you the idea that their way is the Right Way, with or without money (although gaining social capital from such a move is definitely a high motivation). I myself have a very commanding, friendly voice (when I can speak anymore) that I know from unfortunate experience can convince younger folks and even my peers of *almost anything*. And that, folks, is not a particularly unique talent: so be wary.

Though I do my best to be aware of my own extreme biases, sometimes I get reminders that I still hold haughty notions that I need to disabuse myself of; such beliefs can only restrict or even stop my own artistic development (also, any artist who claims they no longer need to develop? Also, at some level, a fraud).

For instance, I---and a lot of other artists---hold in high regard the idea that values in a work should be extremely distinct, and that having a colorful work where, if you grayscaled that piece, you couldn't see the details (because the colors used are different hues but same/similar value) means that you have done BAD ART.

Then this morning I read up on some Impressionist techniques. And it turns out? There is a total use for non-distinct color values in a piece. It's called equiluminance, and it actually creates interactions between different visual systems in the brain that create a shimmering effect. Here's a demo of Renoir's equiluminance in *Poppies, Near Argenteuil*: [clicky](#)

Impressionism, when it first entered the Western art scene, was regarded with disgust by most of the Western art community. In fact, Impressionist paintings weren't even allowed to be part of art shows put on by any of the respected art institutions: impressionist painters were forced to try to develop their own independent art shows with little monetary success. And yet: Renoir, Monet, Degas, and others who were snubbed (including Van Gogh, who was inspired in many ways by Impressionism) are now household names.

And of course the same institutions who threatened their careers and livelihoods now totally respect them, now that they are all dead.

Basically, don't listen to the Establishment when it comes to art. The only "rules" I can come up with after years of writing and some years of art are:

- 1) Be truly honest with your works. Think about them. What's working? What isn't? What's a thing you want to do but you don't know how to? Are you in a rut?
- 2) Research global art history (not just Western art history). Think about what you've researched and seen.
- 3) Experiment how you want to. But be honest with yourself, always, about what you want.

Like, these are not popular rules because they're not prescriptive. Everything is driven by the individual. I could no more berate you for not clearly differentiating values than someone else could insist to me that I lack vision because I don't use single-point perspective. And even so, these aren't universal rules either.

If I were trying to sell you on my art techniques, sell you art classes framed around my methods, sell you art supplies that may or may not be branded by me but always have an Amazon associate id so that I get some kickback from you buying a \$172 colored pencil set, or just trying to sell you my instructional art YouTube channel? Hell, I would write you ten very specific rules. **Twenty! Thirty.** I would sell you my book, I would sell you my art style as a lifestyle brand for

you to consume, and to be consumed by. I would be *your very best friend* and *make sure you followed my rules* and passive-aggressively, *sweetly* tell you when you were *being wrong*.

All this feeds into how I do art critique. Which is that I always ask the artist what their intended effect was, and if they know it, I tell them how certain aspects affected *me* as an individual and not some Universal Truth; no art advice is universal. And if they don't know, I'm not going to offer critique, because I couldn't give one that would actually be truly helpful.

Be really suspicious of people who barge ahead into critique and ignore the artist's goals with a particular piece. And if you do this? **Stop.** It will only make you sad about your own art in the long run.

No art advice is universal.

